PROLOGUE RAISING THE VOICE

STRANGE OBJECT  The voice is elusive. Once you've eliminated everything that is not the voice itself—the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it, what's left? What a strange object, what grist for poetic outpourings . . . I say this because French writing on the voice these days seems like so much formless verbalizing, resolutely skirting the clear and systematic language necessary for making headway.

How can we think about the voice? Freudian psychoanalysis, invented in the form of a talking cure, could have seized upon the voice as an object of study, for in psychoanalysis everything happens in and through speech, even if it only uses the voice as a vehicle for the verbal signifier. But a serious theoretical elaboration of the voice as an object did become possible with Lacan, when he placed the voice—along with the gaze, the penis, the feces, and nothingness—in the ranks of "objet a," these part objects which may be fetishized and employed to "thingify difference." And building on Lacan, the excellent book by Denis Vasse, L'Ombilic et la voix (The Umbilicus and the Voice, published in 1974), proposed one of the first consistent and dialectical approaches to the topic. Vasse's work allowed us not only to speak "around" the voice, but also to consider it as an object, without either becoming lost in the fascination it inspired or reducing it to being merely the vehicle of language and expression.

THERE IS NO SOUNDTRACK By what incomprehensible thoughtlessness can we, in considering what is called the talking picture, "forget" the voice? Because we confuse it with speech. From the speech act we usually retain only the significations it bears, forgetting the medium of the voice itself. Of course the voice is there to be forgotten in its materiality; only at this cost does it fill its primary function.

Discussions of sound films rarely mention the voice, speaking instead of “the soundtrack.” A deceptive and sloppy notion, which postulates that all the audio elements recorded together onto the optical track of the film are presented to the spectator as a sort of bloc or coalition, across from the other bloc, a no-less-fictional “image track.”

And yet everyone knows from experience that nothing of the sort occurs. A film’s aural elements are not received as an autonomous unit. They are immediately analyzed and distributed in the spectator’s perceptual apparatus according to the relation each bears to what the spectator sees at the time. (First and foremost: according to whether you see in the image the source attributed to the sound—for example, if words are heard, whether or not you see the person who is speaking.) It’s from this instantaneous perceptual triage that certain audio elements (essentially those referred to as synchronous, i.e., whose apparent source is visible onscreen) can be immediately “swallowed up” in the image’s false depth, or relegated to the periphery of the visual field, but on alert to appear if there’s a sound whose cause is temporarily put offscreen. Meanwhile, other aural elements, notably background music and offscreen commentary, are triaged to another place, an imaginary one, comparable to a proscenium.

If there is an invisible orchestra playing the film music, we might think of this proscenium as an orchestra pit like that of opera or vaudeville (it was of course a real orchestra pit during the silent era in large movie theaters). And if we hear a commentator’s voice, it corresponds to a sort of podium below the screen or alongside.

These distinctly different triages of sounds emitted from the single real source of the loudspeaker, triages based on the simple criterion of each sound’s relation to each image at each moment, already testify sufficiently that there is no soundtrack, to put it provocatively. It is the image that governs this triage, not the nature of the recorded elements themselves. The proof is that so-called synchronous sounds are most often forgotten as such, being “swallowed up” by the fiction. The meanings and effects generated by synch sounds are usually chalked up to the image alone or the film overall. Only the creators of
a film's sound—recordist, sound effects person, mixer, director—know that if you alter or remove these sounds, the image is no longer the same. On the other hand, the sounds from the proscenium, at a remove from the visual field, more easily gain the spotlight, for they are perceived in their singularity and isolation. This is why people have written much more about film music and voiceover commentary than about so-called synchronous sounds, most often neglected unjustly for being "redundant."

To see or not to see the sound's source: it all begins here, but this simple duality is already quite complex. We can suppose that there aren't just two places for the triage to go, that a sound can be non-synchronous without necessarily inhabiting the imaginary proscenium offscreen I have described. Consider as examples the "offscreen" voice of someone who has just left the image but continues to be there, or a man we've never seen but whom we expect to see, because we situate him in a place contiguous with the screen, in the present tense of the action. These sounds and voices that are neither entirely inside nor clearly outside are those that interest me the most, as will become amply evident. Because perhaps it is with these sounds and voices left to wander the surface of the screen that the real and specific power of the cinema comes into play.

Indeed, all the other cases or types of voices in cinema may have derived from older dramatic forms. The synchronous voice comes from the theater; film music comes from opera, melodrama, and vaudeville; and voiceover commentary from the magic lantern shows and from older arts involving narrated projections.

The cinema has its own specific devices for putting these three situations into play, but it nevertheless inherits and deploys the older genres' principles. However, sounds and voices that wander the surface of the screen, awaiting a place to attach to, belong to the cinema and to it alone. Their effect is all the more elusive in that it occurs in a context where sounds and images are ceaselessly moving and changing.

Having abruptly decreed that there is no soundtrack, let us go further, and make a dent in the notion that for the filmic spectator, there are "sounds" as a collective entity—as if we received sonic messages, in films and elsewhere, in an undifferentiated and neutral way; as if our hearing weren't first and foremost human hearing.

VOCATIONALISM In actual movies, for real spectators, there are not all the sounds including the human voice. There are voices, and then everything else. In other words, in every audio mix, the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception.

Christiane Sacco elegantly writes, "The presence of a body structures the space that contains it" (meaning of course the human body). Let us paraphrase this to say that the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.

Near the Forum des Halles, which in 1978 was a large new shopping mall in the middle of Paris, a giant cement construction presented to the passerby the spectacle of a blind wall, an immense neutral rectangle, empty and vertical like a blank page. One day someone painted onto this surface a small walking man and his shadow—occupying about one hundredth of the wall. The moment this figure appeared, the visual space was structured entirely around him. His presence gave the space an inclination, a perspective, a left and right, a front and rear. It's the same for any sonic space, empty or not. If a human voice is part of it, the ear is inevitably carried toward it, picking it out, and structuring the perception of the whole around it. The ear attempts to analyze the sound in order to extract meaning from it—as one peels and squeezes a fruit—and always tries to localize and if possible identify the voice.

This is such a natural reflex that everything is mobilized implicitly, in the classical cinema, to favor the voice and the text it carries, and to offer it to the spectator on a silver platter. The level and presence of the voice have to be artificially enhanced over other sounds, in order to compensate for the absence of the landmarks that in live binaural conditions allow us to isolate the voice from ambient sounds. But production mixing—what in French is called "prise de son" or taking of
sound during shooting—is really a "taking of voices" in most cases; the other noises are reduced as far as possible. In the same way, the technical and aesthetic norms of the classic cinema were implicitly calculated to privilege the voice and the intelligibility of dialogue. Is it not natural to ensure comprehension of what is spoken? No doubt yes, but intelligibility is not the only thing at stake. It's rather the privilege accorded to the voice over all other sonic elements, in the same way that the human face is not just an image like the others. Speech, shouts, sighs or whispers, the voice hierarchizes everything around it. Just as a mother awakes when the distant crying of her child disturbs the normal sound environment of the night, in the torrent of sounds our attention fastens first onto this other us that is the voice of another. Call this *vococentrism* if you will. Human listening is naturally vococentric, and so is the talking cinema by and large.

Hitchcock said something once in an interview for *Cahiers du cinéma* that provided inspiration for my own thinking (he was speaking not of the soundtrack but of the frame): "The first thing I draw [in storyboarding], no matter what the framing, is the first thing that people will look at—faces. The position of the face determines the shot composition." I had only to transpose this lucid remark to the aural register: the first thing people hear is the voice. Now I had an axis, a way to talk about *film sound* which was no longer merely a tiresome academic subject. I no longer faced the inert, heterogeneous and undifferentiated mass connoted by the catchall term "soundtrack." Just as the question of the closeup became clarified as soon as it was viewed with reference to the human measure, it is by relating the question of film sound to human perception (which is naturally vococentric) that we escape the mechanistic and reductionist impasse that the notion of a soundtrack leads to. Which doesn't mean we can't refocus eventually on the other sounds, on noises and music.

**WHEN THE CINEMA WAS DEAF**

Jean Painlevé wrote that "the cinema has always been sound cinema." Jean Mitry specified, on the other hand, that "the early cinema was not mute, but quiet." To which Adorno and Eisler replied in advance, "the talking picture, too, is mute." Indeed, corrects Bresson, "there never was a mute cinema." Besides, André Bazin noted, "But not all of silent films want to be such," and so on.1 I throw out these few citations (out of context, to be sure) to stir the waters of pat formulas; to this I'll toss another stone of my own in stating that the silent cinema should really be called "deaf cinema."

First, why do the Latin countries call silent cinema "mute cinema"? It is interesting to ask at what moment this expression arose. Logically, it would be with the birth of the talkies, when the latter retrospectively made clear that the movies that came before were voiceless. Not that people didn't know that; they had simply forgotten. Similarly, while we await the three-dimensional cinema of the future, we continually forget that the cinematic image is flat, although it tries to make us believe the contrary.

But the spectat ors and critics of 1925 didn't talk of going to see a mute film or silent film any more than we say we're going to see a talkie or sound film today. The symbolic date of 1927, the year of *The Jazz Singer*, marks the moment when the entire previous cinema was retrospectively declared silent, just as perhaps one day people will talk of the flat cinema. Today's flat cinema *dreams of depth*; and similarly the so-called mute cinema made spectators imagine the voice, far from denying or mourning its demise.

The silent film may be called deaf insofar as it prevented us from hearing the real sounds of the story. It had no ears for the immediate aural space, the here and now of the action.

But the expression "mute cinema" is what had taken hold by 1929, two years after the official birth of the talkies. In French, mute and silent are not synonymous. If the French hardly ever distinguish between sound film and talking film, they speak rarely of "silent" film. In René Clair's writings, the use of this term is an anglicism. The hesitation between mute and silent film, like the one between sound and talking film, centers on the same issue: speech, the voice.

However, could anyone rightly call this cinema silent, which was not...
always accompanied by music from the outset—the Lumière Brothers’ very first screening at the Grand Café in Paris—not to mention the sound effects created live in some movie houses? There were also the commentators, who freely interpreted the intertitles that the audience could not read, since many moviegoers were illiterate and most were unable to cope with subtitles in foreign languages.

The movies were even less deserving of the term “mute,” if by that we’re supposed to understand that the characters did not speak. On the contrary, film characters were quite chatty. In this sense Bresson is right to say that there never was a mute cinema. “For the characters did in fact talk, only they spoke in a vacuum, no one could hear what they were saying. Thus it should not be said that the movies had found a mute style.” How did spectators know that the characters were speaking? By the constant movement of their lips, their gestures that told of entire speeches whose intertitles communicated to us only the most abridged versions. So it’s not that the film’s characters were mute, but rather that the film was deaf to them. This is the reason for using the term “deaf cinema” for films that gave the moviegoer a deaf person’s viewpoint on the action depicted.

Still, this spectator who is forced to be deaf cannot avoid hearing voices—voices that resonate in his or her own imagination. As the radio listener gives a face to her favorite announcers, especially if she has never seen them (which allows her all the more freely to imagine them), likewise the silent-film spectator—rather, the deaf-film spectator—imagined the film’s voices, in his or her individual way. Voices in silent film, because they are implied, are dreamed voices. Garbo in the silent era had as many voices as all of her admirers individually conferred on her. The talkie limited her to one, her own.

Had anyone ever before seen a dramatic genre for which the actor moves his lips without our hearing one word? Never, certainly not in mime, which is done with mouths closed. If for some people the talkie still seemed vulgar by comparison to the silents, it is because the real voices heard in it came into conflict with the imaginary voices that everyone could dream to their heart’s content. The same disappointment, the same effect of gross realism arises when on television or in a photograph we see a radio star of whose physical attributes we were previously unaware. (This revelation is becoming rare, but still occurred frequently a generation ago).

So it’s not so much the absence of voices that the talking film came to disrupt, as the spectator’s freedom to imagine them in her own way (in the same way that a filmed adaptation objectifies the features of a character in the novel). We’re no longer allowed to dream the voices—in fact, to dream period: according to Marguerite Duras, the cinema has “closed off” the imaginary. “Something about the silents is lost forever. There is something vulgar, trivial... in the unavoidable realism of direct dialogue... and the inevitable trickery it involves.”

Which doesn’t mean the cinema didn’t quickly discover uses of the voice other than filming plays and musicals (uses that were by no means dishonorable). Indeed, just about all that the cinema can do structurally with the voice in a cinematic narrative can be found in one film from 1932, Fritz Lang’s Testament of Dr. Mabuse. By “structurally” I mean here a syntax of possible relations between the film image and the voice, relationships whose types and combinations seem to be of a limited number. But just as western music has operated for several centuries on the basis of twelve notes, the cinema is far from having exhausted the possible variations on these figures. And the richest of voice-image relations, of course, isn’t the arrangement that shows the person speaking, but rather the situation in which we don’t see the person we hear, as his voice comes from the center of the image, the same source of all the film’s other sounds. This is the cinema’s invention of the acousmêtre.

LACK. From the moment they became heard, the voice and synch sound brought a bit of disappointment to film, the disappointment that comes from the “oral” filling of an absence or lack over which desire has built its nest. Once heard in reality, even the most divine voice had something trivial about it. But as a wise American said to Alexandre Arnoux, “Once you have given a child a doll...
that says ‘papa’ and ‘mama,’ even badly, he doesn’t want any other.”

The dazzling success of the sound film, which to everyone’s surprise profoundly shook up the film industry, demonstrated the strong allure of talkies. Perhaps what people sought there was the same kind of oral satisfaction that today’s special visual effects and Dolby stereo give us, this hyper-nurturing cinema whose sensory realism may offend the cinéphile’s sensibility but that brings us a sort of beatitude. In the same way, the talking films (leaving aside the transitional parlour-talking) were not good at tolerating lack, i.e. silence, even though they authorized silence as a new creative element.

The early sound film lacked lack, so to speak; some time had to pass before the magical and cloying effect of hyperrealism would abate, and for the reappearance of the lack necessary for the sound film’s full functioning.

It should not be assumed that the cinema began to talk in a single moment. In 1895 Thomas Edison first tried to invent sound film. Which was possible technically; the gramophone as well as the telephone were already well in place before cinema. The idea of reproducing reality by coupling sound and image in synch motivated many of film’s pioneer inventors. Between 1895 and 1927, between the Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory and The Jazz Singer, sound film patents number in the dozens, as do the public demonstrations of talking pictures in commercial cinemas (such as the Gaumont-Palace in Paris).

By 1905, processes such as Phono-Ciné-Théâtre, Tonbild, and the Biograph-Phonographe could present to audiences a scene from Hamlet with Sarah Bernhardt, with voices, or a filmed opera like Gounod’s Faust, with sound. The means of synchronization weren’t reliable, though, especially for longer stretches, and the cinema—aesthetically as well as commercially—pursued other directions. This is why, until the watershed of 1927, these numerous experiments remained little more than curiosities.

Reading the newspapers of the time announce these demonstrations of talking cinema before its official birth, we’re struck not by the writers’ lyrical transports but rather the calmness with which they describe it. The public was doubtless acquainted with the idea of talking films if not their reality. They were invited to see them as we are today to see holograms—prepared for, yet amazed by, a new technology still applied only to modest ends. Although all histories of cinema allude to this plethora of sound experiments to one extent or another, they still don’t challenge the next division (statistically based) of film history into a silent period and a sound period.

The so-called silent cinema was thus a sort of lame duck for a long while, quite aware of a change in store. What remained unknown at the time was what would become of the sound film in the long run. But in 1929, or two years after its “birth,” many had already made up their minds. Sound film, they claimed, was only good for filmed theater or musical comedy; ascribing artistic dignity to it was out of the question. For others, the cinema could only hope to acquire such dignity through such phenomena as audiovisual counterpoint. Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and Alexandrov’s manifesto argued against using sounds as flat literal illustrations of images, and in favor of audiovisual counterpoint, wherein sounds declare their independence and act metaphorically, symbolically. And who at the time could foresee the role to be played by the new entity we call the acousmêtre?

If moviegoers were enthusiastic about the talking film—and such was the case for the vast majority—they could enjoy being carried away by its sensory rush. But if people wanted to look for its shortcomings (as we do today for films in stereo), they could note with Alexandre Arnoux the effect of voices being “glued” onto bodies, and the perceptible mismatch between the position of characters’ mouths onscreen and the real source of the sound (the central loudspeaker behind the screen). Today our brains are entirely accustomed to plugging sounds into whatever images we see—sounds whose real localization is much more dispersed and dissociated with respect to what we see.

THE VOICE’S LOSS OF INNOCENCE In a period when the new talking film was contested by such major artists as Chaplin, Eisenstein, and Stroheim, we might well ask why there was so little discussion of the voice in
itself, since it was the voice that truly constituted the great revolution.

It was discussed, of course. It’s just that instead of saying “the voice,” people said “speech” or “dialogue,” putting the focus on language. But since there was already language and speech in the silent film, it was the voice and not language that was the problem. Greta Garbo’s voice was hoarse and had a Swedish accent: the producers of her first talkie, *Anna Christie*, wondered whether audiences would put up with it. John Gilbert’s somewhat high and nasal voice spelled the ruin of his career. The voices of American actors brought British audiences to laughter... It’s against the voice that Chaplin was really protesting, under the name of speech. Sound, on the other hand, didn’t bother him, since he made *sonorized* films until 1935.

As film began to talk, the problem was not text; silent cinema had already integrated text through the bastard device of intertitles. It was the voice, as material presence, as utterance, or as muteness—the voice as being, double, shadow of the image, as a power—the voice as a threat of loss and seduction for the cinema.

“To use sound [as naturalistic speech],” said the three Russians’ manifesto, “will destroy the culture of montage.” René Clair contemplated the talkie as a “frightful monster,” and French film historians Bardèche and Brasillach issued this suggestion: “We who have witnessed the birth of an art may also have witnessed its death.” In a word, the fantasy of the death of cinema was alive and well, as it is today at the beginning of the 1980s. The reasons are no doubt different. It is perhaps only a coincidence that the voice figures prominently today as a theoretical object simultaneously with the appearance of films like Marguerite Duras’s *L’Homme Atlantique*, in which a woman’s voice announces, during a marvelous speech about love, the end of cinema. All this may be only a French phenomenon, coinciding accidentally with revolutionary technological developments (high definition video, new audio processes, home video distribution of films) that mark the end of cinema as we know it.

That the voice has today become a subject of discussion and theo-